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ABSTRACT

A review of the literature in 1965 revealed considerable research into the respective merits of policies of (1) automatic promotion for all pupils, and (2) rigid retention-in-grade for those whose achievement was judged deficient. Although neither extreme was a panacea, promotion appeared to have fewer disadvantages than retention. Pupils who repeated one or more grades tended to become discouraged by their conspicuous failure and to be no better off at the end of their schooling than if they had been promoted each year with their age-mates. Studies since 1965 have suggested that for maximal learning to take place, the crucial issue is how the individual pupil is treated in his school--including how he is either promoted or retained--rather than the adoption of one policy or another. They call for (1) human treatment of each pupil as a person of value, and (2) creative provision of appropriate learning tasks in which the individual pupil can experience success. To assure these conditions, the role of the educator who works with each pupil is no less critical than that of the policy maker. (Author/RC)

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Report #7416

THE PROMOTION/RETENTION DILEMMA:

WHAT RESEARCH TELLS US

An informal review of research literature related to the effects of retention-in-grade upon pupils whose achievement is judged inadequate.

December 1973

THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA

Office of Research and Evaluation

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SUMMARY

A review of the literature in 1965 revealed considerable research into the respective merits of policies of (a) automatic promotion for all pupils, and (b) rigid retention-in-grade for those whose achievement was judged deficient. As a general policy, although neither extreme was a panacea, promotion appeared to have fewer disadvantages than retention. Pupils who repeated one or more grades tended to become discouraged by their conspicuous failure and to be no better off at the end of their schooling than if they had been promoted each year with their age-mates.

Noting that the promotion/retention dilemma has not yet been fully resolved, studies since 1965 have suggested that for maximal learning to take place, the crucial issue is how the individual pupil is treated in his school--including how he is either promoted or retained--rather than the adoption of one policy or another. They call for (a) humane treatment of each pupil as a person of value, and (b) creative provision of appropriate learning tasks in which the individual pupil can experience success. To assure these conditions, the role of the educator who works with each pupil is no less critical than that of the policy maker.

Numerous specific strategies for facilitating--but not guaranteeing--maximal learning have been described in recent research literature, and many developments and proposals have been in the daily news in 1973. Some of the strategies most recently initiated in the School District of Philadelphia are highly consistent with the research findings and hold promise of helping to speed the day when the promotion/retention policy question will have been outgrown.

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THE PROMOTION/RETENTION DILEMMA:

WHAT RESEARCH TELLS US

> Unless a youngster is exposed to meaningful learning experiences at a level he is emotionally and mentally prepared to handle, the question of whether or not he is promoted should not become a major issue; promoted or not, he will benefit very little from school curricula. It may well be, then, that educationally disadvantaged students . . . should be promoted providing there is the least evidence of sincere effort. Nevertheless, the advisability of awarding automatic promotions to educationally disadvantaged students should hardly be considered an irrelevant or peripheral question; instead, it defines the core of the larger challenge we are likely to face in the near future.

Perhaps sooner than Daniel Levine realized when he wrote those words in 1966, the School District of Philadelphia is facing that "larger challenge." The findings of research into the effects of promotion to the next grade or retention in the same grade can probably be understood best when seen in historical perspective.

How the Promotion/Retention Dilemma Developed

Historically, mastery of each school grade's tasks was considered prerequisite to success in the next grade's tasks. Pupils who demonstrated such mastery were considered qualified for promotion; those who did not meet the standard could either try again (repeat the year's work) or give up (drop out of school).

The high-school diploma was accepted as evidence that a person had distinguished himself from those who, for various reasons, had not attained the prescribed levels of mastery in their prescribed annual

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academic tasks. Furthermore, because they had not exercised their option of dropping out, the pupils in any classroom were presumed to be there because they wanted to succeed in their current year's academic tasks.

But what about the unsuccessful pupils, whose formal education ended short of graduation? A growing concern that they--and various other segments of society--were being disadvantaged by their nongraduation led to a "keep them in school" campaign, which resulted in legislation requiring unsuccessful pupils to remain in school (the scene of their failures) until reaching a specified chronological age. Thus the concern for "education for all, whether they want it or not" forced educators to continue working with the unsuccessful--and unwilling--pupils as repeaters instead of ignoring them as dropouts.

Finding their classrooms occupied by pupils whom they had not successfully educated in previous years, teachers could respond variously to the problem. Irresponsible teachers could ignore the special needs of the repeaters; conscientious teachers could try to make the repeated year a more fruitful learning experience than the pupils' earlier attempts had been. However, for the irresponsible the ignored problems did not go away, and even for the conscientious there was a far less than satisfactory rate of improvement among the repeaters.

The Futility of Nonpromotion

The apparent futility of using nonpromotion as a remedial treatment in cases of academic failure was noted in our School District's research bulletin, "School Failure--A Summary of Research Findings," in May 1965:

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> Grade repetition, particularly in the early grades, not only fails to help the majority of pupils academically, but, in many cases, creates additional problems. Factors involved in a student's failure vary from school to school.
>
> The major problems of grade repetition are that the student is older and larger than his classmates, and that his ability, including his learning rate, is generally below the class average.
>
> Several studies have revealed definite relationships between school retardation and delinquency. For youth who have already experienced a poor family life, school failure may provoke resentment.
>
> Yet in particular situations in the senior high school and vocational programs, arbitrary minimum standards must be set for some skills to protect life or to meet specific career demands.

Generally, the 1965 findings have been confirmed by more recent studies. For example, a follow-up of 1968-1969 first graders in Kentucky--where the first-grade retention rate is high--led to the conclusion that "a youngster who attempts first grade twice is not substantially better off than he was the first time." In a Wisconsin study of more than 600 metropolitan high-school students repeating an entire grade (8, 9, 10, or 11), although the whole-grade repeaters generally improved their marks in subjects they had previously failed (and in mathematics and science subjects they had already passed), the amount of improvement during the second year was judged "hardly sufficient to justify a whole year's extra work."

In other studies it was found that (a) marks in repeated subjects tend to be lower than those in subjects taken for the first time, (b) failure can cause forgetting of material that was once learned, and (c) the threat of failure does not increase the rate of educational gain of pupils who are threatened.

Thus repeating a year's work does not assure the overcoming of a deficiency in academic achievement. While some pupils may continue to gain during their second year in any grade, the average gain of the repeaters is less (sometimes by four to six months) than that of equally deficient pupils who are granted conditional promotion. Furthermore, achievement-test scores of many retained pupils have been found to decrease during the year after retention.

The damaging effects of nonpromotion are believed to result not from the repetition itself, but from "the stigma of nonpromotion, the impairment of morale, and the exposure to the same inappropriate methods that previously led to failure."

The contention that a policy of nonpromotion would help schools to "maintain standards" is refuted by evidence that (a) greater achievement has been found in situations where the promotion policy is lenient than where it is rigid, (b) the presence of a large number of retained pupils in a classroom can lower the work standards for the class as a whole, (c) excessive failures may merely indicate that inappropriate standards are being applied, and (d) in their eagerness to pass rather than fail, weak pupils are tempted to become "answer grabbers" and "teacher pleasers" rather than genuine achievers.

To those who suggest that nonpromotion of unsuccessful pupils would aid learning by establishing more homogeneous groups of pupils, it must be said that, to whatever extent such homogeneous grouping is possible, it tends to put low achievers of all sorts together. This often leads to uniform treatment regardless of the reasons for deficiency, and tends to deprive them of the stimulation to be gained from more capable pupils who could be their examples and helpers. In practice, homogeneous

grouping based on academic ability is impossible with self-contained classrooms, because not even the average pupil in the group is achieving at the same level in all subjects. A high rate of nonpromotion has been found not to reduce significantly the range of individual abilities with which the teacher must deal in the classroom. Even after retention, the low achievers are still generally ahead of their peers physically and behind them academically.

Although a cause-and-effect relationship has not been clearly established, failure to be promoted has been found to be associated with a negative self-concept, and elementary-school pupils who have failed more than once tend to have a more negative self-concept than those who have been retained only once. Low self-concept has been found to interfere with scholastic motivation, especially among pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds and minority groups.

Compared with their "socially promoted" peers, nonpromoted pupils "show more symptoms of social and emotional maladjustment, are more often socially rejected by their new classmates, and are more often viewed unfavorably by their teachers." Pupils who view their nonpromotion as a "vote of no confidence" tend to doubt their own ability to achieve and, therefore, tend to put forth less than their best efforts.

Negative attitudes toward school abound among the nonpromoted. Daydreaming and apathy, frequently observed, are believed to be mechanisms of self-defense against the ego-shattering effects of a full awareness by the pupils of their having been branded failures.

Failure is self-perpetuating; its effects are cumulative. Repeated failure tends to induce expectation of further failure. A study

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of Baltimore Head Start pupils found, even in early childhood, "a cycle of frustration and failure in which the child's academic deficits become cumulative." An Arizona study of minority-group elementary-school pupils noted that "each year of accumulating regression carries with it a growing indifference to learning."

Numerous other studies have demonstrated the direct relationship between nonpromotion and the tendency to drop out of school before graduation. A Michigan study of school dropouts confirmed that

> The effects of early school failure experiences have long-term consequences for both a child's subsequent achievement in school and eventual mental health. . . . It appears that the great majority [of school leavers] drop out because they simply cannot tolerate more failure and the commensurate feelings of low self-worth and self-esteem.

Overall, the evidence continues to point strongly to the conclusion that we cannot rely upon nonpromotion in itself to improve school achievement. A nonpromotion policy assures neither more subject-matter mastery nor more rapid progress than social promotion, and usually causes pupil motivation to deteriorate.

The Other Extreme--Promotion for All

Long before all those studies were completed, the pendulum of educational practice was swinging from the one extreme of rigid promotion requirements to the opposite extreme of automatic promotion for all pupils annually, regardless of their rate of learning or their degree of subject-matter mastery. However, automatic promotion has failed to prove itself the easy panacea for which its proponents had hoped. Some of the problems evident in nonpromotion remain uncured by automatic promotion;

others have been merely replaced by a different set of problems.

Educationally disadvantaged youth have been found to learn best in an environment that is structured and consistent. A study of inner-city schools sponsored by the Council for Basic Education has found automatic promotion harmful in that it does not engender self-confidence that is based on demonstrated personal competence. To unperceptive pupils, promotion obtained without effort can give a false estimate of their ability; to the disillusioned, it is less than an earned reward.

For the sponsors of compensatory educational programs, automatic promotion removes a major incentive for their efforts to enable the disadvantaged to succeed in academic competition: if there is to be no competition, poor academic preparation is no disadvantage. For the educator, also, there is a temptation to feel less than "accountable" for the performance of pupils who he knows will be promoted regardless of how well or how poorly they achieve during the current year.

Even when he is "socially" promoted, the inadequately achieving pupil still tends to be maladjusted and at the bottom of his class scholastically. And even when his individual learning experiences are adapted to his abilities, he may find the classroom group activities frustratingly beyond his ability to cope. Insistence that a pupil undertake an educational task (such as learning to read) for which he is still developmentally "unready" has been found to create emotional blocking and apathy that can hinder future efforts. Compared with pupils who are retained in the same grade for a second year, socially promoted pupils have shown a greater tendency (a) to feel inadequate among their peers, (b) to cheat, (c) to be unhappy about low marks, and (d) to feel unwanted at home.

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Opponents of automatic promotion question the desirability of denying any pupil the "right" to fail during childhood, lest he face problems in adult life without having learned either (a) what he is individually able and unable to do, or (b) how to deal effectively with the experience of failing.

Possibly the most vigorous objectors to a policy of social promotion are those who see it as implying a lack of standards in the evaluation of pupil achievement. Although their objections tend to be based on something other than empirical research findings in favor of retention, they do lead to a questioning of the meaning or value of the high-school diploma. Despite their acknowledgment that pupils differ widely in the ability to profit from formal education, they see something incongruous about a high-school graduate who still reads like the average third grader.

The objectors can cite more solid evidence that automatic promotion does not eliminate the inadequate achievers' proneness to dissatisfaction, truancy, and dropping out of school.

Overall, the evidence leads to the conclusion that automatic promotion does not bring automatic freedom from problems in scholastic achievement or in personal/social adjustment. But in terms of its effect on the unsuccessful pupils themselves, a policy of automatic promotion has been found somewhat less unsatisfactory than a policy of automatic retention.

A Dilemma beyond Solution by Policy

The ambivalence of the findings reported in research literature suggests that the "best" promotion policy is yet to be discovered, perhaps

somewhere between the extreme policies of automatic retention of deficient pupils and automatic promotion of all pupils. At least, neither of these extremes has proven to be either the "making" of American education or its undoing. Were it otherwise, our dilemma would have been solved long before 1973.

The literature suggests that the failure of either policy to gain permanent acceptance is largely the result of the individual differences that exist among pupils. It has been found that retention in a grade because of inadequate achievement is not simply the opposite of promotion based on success, but rather has effects that are qualitatively different. There is evidence, also, that individuals' reactions to failure are more varied than their reactions to success: such different reactions as aggression, regression, mechanical repetition, "freezing," skepticism, and panic are not unusual.

Different strategies for remediation have been found necessary in dealing with academic deficiencies stemming from different causes. Pupils suffering respectively from inadequate earlier instruction, poor study habits, dislike of a subject, and general slowness in learning, are unlikely to be helped by identical treatment of any sort, whether it includes promotion or retention. Differences in educational needs among individual pupils must be met, regardless of the particular school's grouping and promotion policy. These differences are apparent only to persons who are in close contact with the individual pupils.

Where the goal of education is maximal learning by each pupil, the key question is no longer, "Should academically deficient pupils be promoted or retained?" They can learn or remain illiterate under either

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procedure. Rather, the question becomes, "How can the most favorable learning situation be provided for this pupil?" In answering this latter question, the decision whether or not to promote the unsuccessful pupil must be made on an individual basis. Placing him with the teacher who will most effectively interact with him and his unique needs usually is more important than classifying the pupil's test scores or his chronological age.

When maximal learning is sought, the pupil's own perception of the situation is seen to be more important than administrative convenience. The specific context or atmosphere in which the pupil is either promoted or retained is more critical than the policy itself. This research-based point of view is well summarized in a 1972 textbook in educational psychology:

> It is apparent . . . that there is no ready answer to the question of promotion versus non-promotion. What is important is how the learner is treated. [Promoted or retained,] he is not to be branded a chronic failure, not to be compared with others who are not really his peers, is to be helped and listened to, and should be encouraged and understood rather than being "beaten down" more and more at home as well as at school.

Some Possible Strategies

The key to attaining the goal of maximal learning for every pupil is to be found not in general statements of policy but in the atmosphere of each school, in the instructional practices in each classroom, and in the interaction (relationship and communication) between the teacher and each pupil.

Maximal learning can take place where there are (a) manifest

acknowledgment of the value of each pupil as a person, and (b) manifest concern for his maximal learning through individually appropriate learning tasks in which he can experience success. The former is basically a matter of practicing good human relations; the latter calls for creative ways of teaching pupils who do not learn adequately when taught by more conventional methods.

Such terms as "individualization," "diagnostic and prescriptive teaching," and "individually prescribed instruction (IPI)" denote some specific approaches to reducing the pupil failure rate. They are based on the finding that success in small tasks is more inspiring than failure in larger ones. Using this approach, the teacher aims to counteract ineffective behaviors by arranging progressively more difficult tasks in which the pupil can succeed. The personal satisfaction to be derived from such successful achievement--not mere praise for effort--seems especially important in the child's early elementary-school years.

The attitudes of pupils, teachers, and parents are crucial if retention-in-grade is to be interpreted constructively. If promotion and retention are to be viewed not as reward and punishment, but rather as alternative placements for maximal learning, all three groups must be helped to understand them as such. Close communication between school and home can aid this understanding. Our School District's current Pupil Progress Reporting Improvement Project (PPRIP), using narrative report-cards and teacher-parent conferences, helps both teachers and parents to understand the child's educational development and the role that the school is seeking to play in it. This deeper understanding can help to overcome the potentially traumatic effects if retention is later found advisable.

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If the pupil is to repeat a grade, it usually is better for him to have a different teacher for a "fresh start." In any case, the first year's teacher should be careful not to appear to have lost faith in the unsuccessful pupil; otherwise, it would be difficult for the pupil to accept retention as being best for him. If the deficient pupil is promoted, his new teacher should do whatever is possible to eliminate his stress and anxiety in the new classroom where most of his classmates will outperform him.

Recognizing that neither universal promotion nor excessive retention is a satisfactory policy, many school systems seek a compromise between those extremes. One such plan is the setting of minimum standards for each grade but not applying them to any pupil who is already two years behind his age-mates. New York City schools have recently specified a limit of one year's retention in the elementary grades and one in the secondary grades, and the provision of "individually prescribed programs" for repeaters, based on their individual deficiencies. Such "compromise" policies are consistent with the research finding that, if absurd extremes are avoided, exact grade placement in itself tends to have little effect on a child's educational development during a given school year.

Ideally, the avoidance of failure is a worthy goal. It is attainable when each pupil's program, pace, and learning tasks are appropriate to his present state of readiness, and when early identification of a learning difficulty is followed by swift and effective treatment. In practice, most schools may need to settle for a policy generally favoring promotion, but allowing occasional purposeful retention in the primary grades. Our School District's recently announced "checkpoint

centers" are a soundly based effort to provide the desirable early identification and prompt remedial treatment.

School counselors can continue their contribution to failure-reduction as they guide pupils in the setting of realistic (attainable) academic and career goals. Flexible scheduling, also, can enable marginal pupils to take some subjects in which they are interested and can taste success even if their other subjects are more difficult.

Complete alternative programs, likewise, can encourage success by making the educational experience relevant to the pupils' diverse needs and interests. Our School District has recently extended the availability of alternative programs to elementary-school pupils.

In its 1973 report, the National Commission on the Reform of Secondary Education, privately supported by the Kettering Foundation, has proposed a reduction of the compulsory attendance age (now 16 in most states) to 14, stating, "If the high school is not to be a custodial institution, the state must not force adolescents to attend." Such a plan, if adopted, could allow unsuccessful or uninterested pupils to seek whatever experiences they consider more relevant or more conducive to their success, leaving high school to the more willing and scholastically able pupils.

A nongraded organization has been tried in various settings as a way of de-emphasizing promotion and thus avoiding or reducing the problems inherent in the promotion/retention dilemma. Nongradedness makes the question of promotion or nonpromotion obsolete. Children do not get promoted from grade to grade, nor do they repeat grades, because there are no grades as such.

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In comparison with overage pupils in a graded organization, overage pupils in a nongraded situation have shown greater conceptual maturity, more participation in group activities, and a greater tendency to be "contributing" members of their classes. Although results at higher grade-levels have been somewhat equivocal, and although organizational structure does not in itself assure attainment of objectives, nongradedness has been used successfully in the primary grades.

One publicized example of a nongraded program is the McKinley School Project in Warren, Ohio, where nongradedness has been combined with team teaching in an effort to overcome some of the disadvantages of the self-contained classroom. A promising development in our own School District in 1973 is the establishment of nongraded instruction in a number of elementary schools where five, six, or seven years will be considered a "normal" period for completing the program. Under this plan the slower learner can progress at his own pace without the trauma of formal, conspicuous retentions.

Another constructive development stemming from our School District's acknowledgment that individual pupils differ from one another is a gradually changing emphasis in the use of standardized test results. There appear to be a decreasing concern for end-of-year statistics, and a growing feeling that teachers should have the test results in time to use them in planning the lessons that will be most appropriate for their pupils. Our December 1973 achievement testing is part of an exploratory move in this direction.

Unfortunately, the problem of evaluating the high-school diploma is not eased by a school system's provision of highly diversified programs

and individualized expectations of pupils' progress. One suggestion in this regard has been offered in 1973 by the Pennsylvania Citizens' Commission on Basic Education. Decrying a "custodial" approach to education, the commission has proposed that the high-school diploma be replaced with an "exit certificate" which would include an indication of the specific level of academic proficiency attained by the individual pupil.

Even with the implementation of these and other encouraging strategies, there are sociological reasons to believe that urban education will continue to face an uphill struggle for a long time. A 1958 study found that nonpromoted pupils tend to come from culturally deprived homes. A 1971 study of Mexican American, American Indian, and black pupils in five southwestern states indicated that the members of minority groups have a greater tendency than other pupils to repeat grades. A University of Wisconsin analysis of 1960 census data revealed that a pupil's rate of progress in school is closely related to his age, race, sex, rural/-urban status, parents' income, and especially parents' education.

Such findings lead to the observation that the variables most closely related to children's progress in school are demographic factors which are quite beyond the control of the pupils themselves. Furthermore, except as long-term evolution may change the home conditions in the community, these factors are also beyond the control of the schools' policy makers.

In the meantime, the schools can strive to provide the supportive therapy of a personalized educational experience for every pupil. At this point in our School District's history, it appears that another swing of the promotion-policy pendulum--back toward stricter requirements--might

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serve as a slogan or symbol under which our zeal for effective education can be renewed. Its slogan value is not destroyed by the fact that a strict retention policy in itself has been found somewhat less effective than a policy favoring social promotion.

Even if research has found it to be less than ideal, no slogan can be "all bad" if its use as a rallying cry indirectly facilitates the really effective classroom conditions under which each child is stimulated to attain his own highest possible level of achievement. After all, as research tells us, how the pupil is promoted or retained is more important than whether he is.

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